

**Comment [e1]:** Suppress page numbering on page 1

The Ideal of Inclusionary Community Schools  
In New Brunswick

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**Comment [e3]:** Student name

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13 December 2010

Gr. 8 LA

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Community schools in Canada have proven to provide the support for the needs of students in various socio-economic levels across the country. With the holistic approach to the individual student, community schools open their doors to the community in order to meet the needs of the individual students in the school. The community also creates opportunities for students to contribute to the community in various ways. With the support and contribution of various partners, such as the human service sectors, government, families and communities agencies, the collaborative effort builds a successful foundation for the individual student to become a contributing citizen of the community. New Brunswick can adopt many of the attributes the community schools in Saskatchewan and other places across the country have implemented. Leading Canada in inclusionary practice, New Brunswick needs to support the inclusion policy with resources and opportunities that will create a successful, balanced and contributing citizen in the community. The leaders and administration within the schools must take the initiative to begin these relationships.

### **Community Approach**

The perspective of seeing the student as a child and not merely a student brings the various other aspects of the life of the student into focus; the family, the school and the community are all part of a collaborative team to support the student in the community school approach (Epstein 1995). There has been much research to support the idea of a community approach to education and the success it brings, both to the student and to the community. The idea is that the school has members onsite as a support team which may include a variety of agents, such as a public health nurse, dietician, social worker, youth worker, and a community police resource officer who

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provide students with more opportunities to gain the knowledge and skills for healthy behaviours, make better life choices and, ultimately, “to respond to life’s changes and challenges with resiliency and emotional maturity” (Alberta 2008). Working collaboratively with leaders within the school, the team creates an environment that is stable and supportive, creating the opportunity to be successful both in the classroom and in society. The team of community partners and educational leaders set goals for the individual student, recognizing the need for goals in the life of the student.

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The collaborative community approach has been successful in other initiatives, such as health education in reducing teen pregnancy, when the combined team work of the many adults involved in the life of the student embrace and support the goals of the student. These partners include parents, church, community and government agencies as well as the educational leaders, administrators and school staff (Vincent 1987). The student benefits from the collaborative effort, and the school, parents, community members and agencies as well as the school leadership also benefit from the team work creating opportunities for the child to give back to the community in a successful manner. Partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to be successful in attaining their goals. When children feel the adults in their life care for and are encouraging them as a student, they are more likely to apply their best ‘to learn to read, write, calculate, and learn other skills and talents and to remain in school’ (Epstein, 1995). School leaders can initiate this environment for students.

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### **Community Schools**

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Focusing on education and citizenship, community schools are inclusionary in the holistic sense of the word. Needs of the individual student are addressed and supported,

not only by the educators and staff of the school, but also through various community partners. These partners are at work in a variety of manners already in New Brunswick; however, they are in various degrees of isolation with the school community. Social services may provide counselling for a student who is struggling with home issues or perhaps social issues that are beyond the scope of the school support staff. An example here in New Brunswick would be students who are struggling due to lack of parental support and the student may live in a group home. The team approach to the success of the student is an opportunity for community school values to be implemented through the leaders within the school. Here in New Brunswick, the various partners involved in the life of the student come together on occasion and goals are set, sometimes in unison, often initiated by school staff and administration. In Saskatchewan, students with home issues would have social assistance, like this, readily available to them with communication being paramount between the school, home and provincial social agency, this being upheld through onsite agencies and partners at the school.

The community also contributes to the goals by creating 'school-like opportunities, events, and programs that reinforce, recognize, and reward students for good progress, creativity, contributions, and excellence' (Epstein, 1995). These are opportunities for parents of other students as well as immediate family members to work with community agencies to create a successful environment for the student inside and outside the school community. Other families offer support, neighbours and various adults in the life of the student work collaboratively toward this goal, 'where programs and services for students, parents, and others are offered before, during, and after the regular school day' (Epstein, 1995 ). In New Brunswick, these agencies would be onsite,

rather than occasionally coming to the school, in order to offer support to the student(s) when the need arose. Moving the office of a social worker to the school would create an invaluable resource to the staff, the students as well as the community. Educators and administration would ensure the communication between the agencies, the family and the school was clear and the needs of the student are met.

### **Aspects of Community School**

There are four aspects of community schools, based on the Saskatchewan model, that are instrumental to their success in that province. With these four aspects, the learning program, family and community partnerships, integrated services and community development, working in a harmonic, comprehensive style, the success of the student is valued in a holistic manner.

#### *The Learning Program*

Grounded in provincial curriculum, educational support is aimed towards the success of the student in both academics and in life as a citizen of the community. The instruction of the student is individualized based on the socioeconomic status of the student, as well as the life experiences that the student brings to school. In Saskatchewan, the learning programs would emphasize early intervention and retention programs which are also aspects needed in New Brunswick schools. With a largely rural population, each New Brunswick student brings various life experiences and needs to the classroom. An educator is only part of the support system needed to support a successful academic and emotional citizen in the community.

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*Family and Community Partnerships*

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One of the key focuses of community schools in Saskatchewan, and other community schools across the country, is to build relationships between families, communities and the school. The ideal, ‘it takes a village to raise a child’ is actualized in this aspect of community schools. A shared vision is constructed between all partners involved, which may take some time to build. Relationships with some families may need special attention due to broken or struggling relationships from past experiences. For example, some parents do not know what is expected or permitted as far as parental involvement in the school system. Communication of these expectations and avenues of involvement at various levels of schooling would support the success of the student as well as create a team atmosphere between school and the family. Educators and administrators must learn to open the lines of communication with the other adults involved in the life of the student as each partner has the same goal, the success of the student.

*Integrated Services*

Collaboration of various organizations in the community, government and school provide the support and programs that the student requires in order to be successful both academically and as a citizen of the community. Coordinating the resources of the services that are available provides what the student needs, regardless of social, emotional, health or academic deficits that are known in the life of the student. A true coordinated community effort is required and offers the student support as a united front. Having these resources and partners onsite, readily available, is of utmost significance to create this supportive and valuable tie. The establishment and nurturing of these

relationships and resources requires time and skill on the part of the educator and administration.

### *Community Development*

In this aspect of community schools, community development is “about identifying connecting and mobilizing the strengths within the community to achieve desired outcomes” (Saskatchewan 2004). Identifying and connecting with partners in the community that share in the common goal of success of the student in the community school becomes the main goal of community school building. As this may be unfamiliar territory for many schools and educators looking to build relationships with community partners, conditions must be in position in order for the common focus and expectations to be met by all parties involved. In New Brunswick, there are some co-operative programs that have met with success in various high schools across the province. This allows for the students to experience firsthand the support of the community, what the community has to offer as well as opening opportunities for the community to participate in the success of the individual student. However, the implementation of these high school courses has an occupational focus, not necessarily the goal of creating contributing citizens in the community. Opening the doors of the community earlier in the life of the student would create the attention and focus needed to balance work-related goals with being a part of the community and giving back, no matter the age of the student. This is a step educators and administrators at the elementary and middle level must consider if community schools are to be embraced and become successful.

### **Inclusionary Schools**

**Comment [e16]:** New subtitle; cues reader the topic has changed.

Problems, either physically or emotionally, pervade all aspects of the life of a student; a team approach is necessary, involving many segments of the community. Community schools offer much needed support for students with physical, mental or emotional challenges. The educator will lead the way in setting goals for the student in academics; however, the team of partners would ensure that goals were set in other aspects of the student's life. These partners would also ensure that the student was provided the resources needed to be successful in achieving these goals. The goals and achievements of the student would be assessed at the beginning of each academic year by the team of educational leaders and community members, ensuring the assessment was relevant to the goals and new goals were set in place collaboratively. Adjustments would be made to the strategies as the year progressed as the team would see necessary. This encourages successful inclusionary practice. As these practices currently stand in New Brunswick, goals are set accordingly but facilitated primarily by the Methods and Resources support of the school. The educator and parents/guardians are merely secondary members in this decision making process. Creating a community school, all members of the team for the student would contribute equally creating optimal conditions for success in the student's life.

In New Brunswick, leading the country with inclusionary practice, students who may feel isolation or loneliness in other circumstances, would have the opportunity to build relationships with various community partners as well as the school community (Irvine & Lupart 2008). Social supports, as well as academics, are essential for success in the community. Without these proper supports, inclusion does not work and can have



an opposite effect. Students that enter the educational system with challenges cannot be considered 'inclusionary' because of placement; their needs must be supported by the school as well as by community partners and familial relationships in order to meet success. Many students with challenges often experience alienation and isolation, socializing less with their age group compared to their peers. However, feelings of alienation stop once the student enters a community school (Irvine and Lupart 2008). Being included from the beginning of the academic career of a child is of utmost importance, being a contributing member of the school community and the community at large create this successful atmosphere for students who would experience isolation or loneliness in another sphere.

Community involvement is not just the school involved in the community but also the community involved in the school. This creates a connectedness between school and the community with communication and contributions being valued in both ways. Based on the youth demographic and community needs, resources are made available and relationships built both within the school and outside in the community (Loreman 2007). This relationship will be built and nurtured over time, but must be initiated by the school leadership, either the educators or administration or both. This type of openness creates a vulnerability that many schools in New Brunswick are not familiar with. However, trust will ensue as the relationships are cultivated over time.

### **Family**

Family support is deemed as the one main factor influencing success in the inclusionary classroom for students with physical or emotional challenges. A student improves in various aspects of life, such as academics, behaviours and emotionally, when

the parents and families members are involved in the school (Alberta 2008). The relationships built between the school and the family are valuable towards contributing to the success of the student. Onsite support must be in place for those children who experience family stress or violence, implementing resources already in place through the school relationships with the agencies involved. Family support may not come from parents but may come from siblings (Irvine & Lupart) who offer modeling social skills and building relationships. Service providers offer opportunities to create and build relationships both within the community school as well as the community for both the student in need and the family members.

Parents can become involved in schools through school councils, composed of parents and teachers to make decisions regarding the school (Istance 2006). Here in New Brunswick, it is the PSSC. Parental involvement can result in decisions which can influence curricula as well as what the cafeteria is serving students for lunch. With relationships like these, community schools can build relationships between home and school supporting the lives of students. Including student representatives in these boards or associations, the success of the students becomes more readily evident to the student body. In Denmark, the school of governors is composed of elected members who are parents of students currently attending the school, school staff and students from the school. Although this is not labelled a community school, the focus is on the success of the students with all partners working in synchronization to help the students become successful members both of the school and of the community at large.

In Japan, parents and community are encouraged to be involved in the life of the school in order to bring stronger accountability (Istance). It is, in fact, this accountability

factor that hinders the progress towards the implementation of community schools in New Brunswick. Making educators more accountable is not the issue; it is bringing all parties involved in the life of the student accountable collectively (Henderson 2007).

Community schools are sensitive to local needs to support students, having a common focus in the success of the individual student. School leaders and administration can create cultures that encourage parent-school relationships as well as relationships with other partners in the community that help minimize differences amongst students, such as socioeconomics, physical or emotional challenges, or perhaps family composition. This needs to be taught and modelled from within the leadership of the school to improve these relationships.

Parents are often perceived as part of the community ties but are, in fact, part of the 'core school community' (Loreman). Parents are a main educator to a child making a relationship with the school important in the success of the academic and community life of the student. Creating an open relationship, one of communication and skill building, is essential from school leadership.

### **Advocacy Groups**

Advocacy groups need to be welcomed by the school administration and educators as part of the team to support both the individual student as well as parents. These groups provide school leadership with resources, counselling and advice when dealing with students, especially those who experience physical or emotional challenges (Loreman). One such agency in New Brunswick schools is APSEA, a resource agency for hearing impaired students, who come into the school on a regular basis to work with their clients. APSEA also offers guidance to educators when dealing with students who

are hearing impaired, which can make the difference in the success of any individual student. In one particular team consultation, the suggestion of the APSEA representative for the educator to use *single step tasks* for a hearing impaired student created an environment for success. The student had been overwhelmed with information and procedures that would result in her shutting down and attempting no work at all. Reduced to a single step task, she met with success in each task attempted throughout the remainder of the year.

### **Church**

Building relationships with local churches and other religious organizations can become hugely beneficial to students in community schools. The church can be viewed as an integral part of any community and, thus, can become a partner in supporting the student. Many schools have opportunities for this avenue to support students with such organizations as Youth for Christ and Interact; both are groups within the school that reach out to the community at large. The caring nature of the church environment supports parents and students both within and outside the community school (Irvine & Lavine). Although this avenue must be treated with sensitivity and thoughtfulness by school administration, it can be hugely beneficial to those students who already have a support system within the church.

This community partner is one which is readily available in New Brunswick. With such a large rural population, and being a very conservative portion of the country, the church has already established itself as a supportive community member in many cases.

### **Rural Communities**

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Students and families from rural communities already have a sense of community and a strong tie with one another (Irvine and Lavine). In New Brunswick, with such a large population living in rural communities, this tie is evident to school leadership as well as the community at large. One only needs to enter a community like Harvey Station on a day when the middle school girls are playing basketball in the school gym to experience this kind of community support. The challenge comes with students who are bussed from these remote rural areas for more than an hour to a school located in a more urban area. Students may experience feelings of isolation from being an outsider or feel challenged to take part in activities at the school due to transportation and time challenges. Through the insight of the leadership to offer a variety of activities, at various costs and times, activities and events become essential to building relationships between the school and the community, no matter how sparse the population may be in relation to one another. This, too, is an area which needs time and skill from school leadership invested in order to be successful in the lives of the students as well as the community.

### **Liaison**

The background of the students can bring cohesiveness, or lack thereof. With such diversity in the classroom and more educators coming from very different backgrounds than their students, support must be garnished from the community in order for students to meet academics and life with success (Sanders 2008). The presence of a liaison, a leadership position within the school, to promote the communication and building a strong relationship between parents and the school is one option to improve ties to the community as well as increase parental involvement in the success of student

achievements. This may also be part of a distribution of power, function and resources in one agency (Henderson, 2007) or one school leader, the liaison.

Training, once again, is important to ensure liaisons are successful in building this relationship between schools and parents. Socio-economics, culture, rural living and minority families are challenges which must be overcome and participation encouraged in the school environment to bring success to their child's academic life as well as the community life. This is experienced and encouraged through increase communication and cooperation of the parent-school liaison. Liaisons are also instrumental in connecting the students, and their families, with the agencies and resources needed (Sanders). There are many educators, administrators and department heads in schools that would welcome the involvement of families but do not know how to go about it in a positive manner. This brings about a fear of trying and opening the doors of the school to more accountability (Epstein). With job-sharing, strengthened communication and relationships with outside agencies, collectively a liaison could be an initial step towards building a community school and setting the foundation, here in New Brunswick, to establish the ties that will, hopefully, be long lasting.

### **A Final Thought**

One aspect of community schools that has yet to be discussed is the training of school leaders, staff, and administration in the building of relationships with families, the community as well as community agencies. With the stage being set, training educational leaders to deal with parental involvement and the creation and sustenance of community ties is a necessity that must be addressed for community schools to meet success in New Brunswick. Working collaboratively...“the adults in a student's life can

‘wrap around’ a student to develop effective programming, interventions and supports” (Alberta 2008). With the ties already being closely knit in much of the rural communities, with the school and between families, community schools are but one choice away from being a reality.

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**Comment [e24]:** Volume and number are given in a reference of journals; page numbers, too.

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adolescent pregnancy through school and community-based education. *JAMA*, June 26, 1987 Vol 257, No. 24